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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000500

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SUBJECT: PROBING SARG TIES TO FATAH AL-ISLAM

REF: DAMASCUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Our contacts offer contradictory assessments about whether the SARG has been involved in supporting Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon. A majority suspect there is some link, with many pointing to the suspicious timing for the outbreak of fighting, on the eve of UNSC consideration of a Chapter VII tribunal resolution, while others insist that the SARG has severed any links to this group that may have existed in the past, over fears that such groups could pose threats to internal stability inside Syria. Contacts who denied any links, however, also unintentionally offered insights that seemed to undercut their positions. As reported reftel, we do not have compelling evidence that the SARG has links to Fatah al-Islam. However, limited evidence of previous links, the current timing, as the UNSC takes up a Chapter VII resolution on the tribunal, and the credible view that the SARG wants controllable instability in Lebanon, to support its ongoing support for the stagnating political status quo, leave open the possibility that the SARG has played a role in this spike in instability in Lebanon. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Contacts here in Damascus disagree about whether the Syrian regime has links to Fatah al-Islam and is manipulating the fighting in Nahar al-Barid camp to destabilize Lebanon and lay down markers in advance of the UNSC's consideration of a Chapter VII resolution establishing the special Lebanon Tribunal. Many Syrians, both in the opposition and those merely quietly critical of the regime, suspect that such ties exist, although most are exceedingly cautious about elaborating that view. Even people who profess to support Bashar, but dislike the rest of the government, have assented that there could be a link. Senior opposition figure Riad Turk, echoing the belief of many in the opposition, set forth this view most explicitly in a May 22 meeting with A/DCM. Turk insisted the fighting in Lebanon had been "manufactured" by the Syrian regime. The Fatah al-Islam fighters, in his view, are clearly "agents" of the Syrian security services. Turk noted that the regime has an open door policy allowing these foreign fighter "terrorists" to transit Syria to go to Iraq. It is very easy for the security services to channel some of them into Lebanon, to use them as a pressure point there, in a variation on the way they are being used in Iraq. Such usage fits with plans of the Syrian regime to create instability in Lebanon, while ensuring that Hizballah, for internal Lebanese political reasons, is not involved.

¶3. (C) This action is tied to the tribunal developments, said Turk. The regime is not sure what UNIIIC investigator

Brammertz has but it is very fearful, according to Turk. Senior Syrian figures want some kind of deal to avoid any accusations that could shake the regime, he added. They don't want any Syrian to be summoned or tried outside of Syria, because of fears over what he might say to implicate the regime. For Turk, echoing a standard opposition view, the SARG "is a terrorist state" that has used such dirty games for years to stay in power and maintain its regional influence, especially in Lebanon.

¶4. (C) Other contacts, such as MFA advisor and think tank director Dr. Samir al-Taki, and businessman, analyst former classmate of Bashar, Mousalem al-Drubi discounted the possibility that the SARG has links with Fatah al-Islam. However, both men separately offered tortured, somewhat contradictory arguments that at times undercut this view. They both expressed doubt that the Syrians are behind the violence, and discounted the "timing" argument as proof of SARG complicity, maintaining that the SARG strategy for countering a Chapter VII) constituted tribunal is not to foment instability in Lebanon. That could be hard to control and invite "dramatic" interventions that might not be in Syria,s interests. Instead, insisted al-Taki, the strategy is to rely on the stagnated political status quo, which is likely to lead to &two governments8 and prevent any real Lebanese government action essential to implementation of the resolution and functioning of a tribunal.

¶5. (C) He also noted that the Syrians are playing for time while they re-arm Hizballah and allow it to re-build and enlarge its fighting forces. They do not want that project endangered by instability that might invite outside intervention.

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¶6. (C) By way of background, al-Taki noted that Syrian security services and in particular SMI used to have relations with a range of Islamist fundamentalists in northern Lebanon. (Al-Taki has in the past described repeatedly to A/DCM how the security services have tried to use groups like Fatah al-Islam) he mentioned Ansar al-Islam and others as earlier examples -- as an instrument of influence in Lebanon.). However, in the past six months to a year, President Bashar al-Asad got nervous about these ties and had ordered them cut, for two reasons:

-- Fears that the UNIIIC investigation had tied some of them to the killing of Rafik al-Hariri; and,

-- Concerns about blowback and internal security fears here in Syria, relating to the regime's efforts to battle some elements of these groups inside Syria.

¶7. (C) Both men also argued that the Syrians in the past two years had competed with Sa'ad Hariri to influence these groups. When asked why such ideologically motivated people could be used by either Hariri or the Syrians, al-Taki noted that such people &have many targets; it is a question of shaping their priorities.8 He described Fatah al-Islam, despite the group's ideological motivations, as &guns for hire.8 Responding to deep skepticism that Sa'ad Hariri would involve himself with such groups, however indirectly, al-Taki noted that Hariri and the Syrians had each tried to &aim8 these groups at the other, but had little else to offer when A/DCM expressed skepticism about this assertion.

¶8. (C) Al-Taki hinted, somewhat gingerly, at the possibility of limited, unauthorized security services' ties to Fatah al-Islam, despite the order from the top to sever relations. He also raised the figure of Fathi Yakan, an ex-Muslim Brother and an extremely influential Lebanese Islamist, who is now very pro-Syrian and hinted that he is involved somehow with some of Sunni Islamist groups, but did not clarify exactly how. After Drubi had denied any SARG link to FAI or

any interest in destabilizing Lebanon, he circled back, underlining to Pol/EconChief how fearful the regime remained about the tribunal and noting that the regime feels cornered.

Absent a deal with the U.S. on Lebanon, Drubi expected continued instability and a high likelihood of escalating violence in Lebanon.

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